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Living City

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SUPPLEMENT

PAUL VI AND THE FOCOLARE MOVEMENT

Following the death of Paul VI, we asked a few questions of Chiara Lubich, foundress of the Focolare Movement.

Chiara, what was your reaction when you first learned that Paul VI had died?

It was the reaction of practically everybody, I think: the shock of an unexpected event, a moment of acute grief, and the urge to intensely pray to God that he may receive the saintly soul of our father. Even more, I felt an infinite gratitude and, in response to the confidence the Pope had shown in the Movement, an even deeper sense of responsibility for the work that God has entrusted to me. When some people in the Movement who were overcome with grief asked me what I thought, I simply said, "Be worthy of the Pope's trust in us."

And then I experienced a complete serenity which was never shaken, not even when I attended the funeral. For me the Pope is not dead. He has changed his residence — from the Chair of St. Peter, from which he watched over and and protected us, to the presence of God, where he cannot fail but continue to protect us with the sensitive, concrete, maternal and constant love which he had lavished on us while he was on this earth. I feel that the Pope is not lost to us, because of the very fact that when one passes to the other life, the one thing that remains is charity. And we know that charity is the love of God diffused in our hearts. The bond between Paul VI and us was "charity." His was not a superficial benevolence. His was a charity that was active, bold, sacrificial, patient, always helpful and encouraging. He rejoiced in the good of all.

Did you know Paul VI even before he was Pope?

Yes, I met him as far back as 1952. He used to see us in his Vatican apartment whenever we needed advice. It was at that time that he intuited the presence of new charism in the Church, a charism which needed to be sustained and encouraged. He listened with interest to our stories of conquests for the kingdom of God, of the spreading of the Movement; he showed us his esteem.

In the period, since the Movement had spread beyond the confines of the region of Trent where it had been approved by Archbishop De Ferrari, it was under examination by Rome. This situation obviously left us in a state of suspension at times. Monsignor Montini would reassure us, saying that the fact that the Church was studying us meant "protection and warranty" for us.

It was also at that time that the first vocation to the priesthood matured among the focolarini in the person of Pasquale Foresi. We did not know how he could be ordained, and still remain at the service of the Movement, so we asked Monsignor Montini for advice and he told us what steps to take.

It was Monsignor Montini who, in 1953, when the Movement had not as yet been officially approved by the Holy See, arranged for a private audience with Pope Pius XII. It was an unforgettable audience which, as you can imagine, gave us a greater thrust ahead.

Did Paul VI receive you personally after he became Pope?

In the fifteen years of his pontificate I had the grace of several private audiences. I shall always remember the first, in 1964. Yes, he was the same person and yet different. There was the grace of the Vicar of Christ in that study which for me was the threshold of Paradise. How much wisdom, how much openness, in his immense heart! I was there to tell him about a new movement born in the Church, new both in its spirituality and its structure. But I had no difficulty there. It was really like being before Jesus, the same Jesus who had inspired, year after year, the soul and the body of this Movement.

I remember that since that first meeting he was keenly interested in the ecumenical aspect of the Movement. At the end he told me, "You have opened the dialogue with the non-Catholic Christians. Now you must also begin a dialogue with those who have no faith."

Then there were the other audiences. We talked about how the Movement was spreading, about the various vocations being born within it, and about the changes in its statute which had to keep pace with all the other new developments which came about as this work of God matured.

The audience of 1969 was unforgettable. Because of the newness of this Movement which brought unity on all fronts, we were afraid that we would not get the approval for our plan of keeping one center which would coordinate the women's part of the Movement as well as the men's part, the various vocations of lay people, priests and religious, the various branches, the various mass movements within the

Movement. The Pope wanted to personally take care of this matter and we were given approval.

Now I will tell you of a little detail. In another audience I confided to the Pope a certain concern of mine. It was in 1967. The second generation of the Focolare Movement was exploding in all the countries of the world where the Movement had spread. The Gen (this is what our young people are called) often attended papal audiences. They saw the Pope as their own leader. They admired him, they sincerely loved him, and they listened to him. Each time they saw him they would greet him with long and thunderous applause. They felt, and certainly were, well loved by him.

I expressed concern that this kind of behavior might not be understood by all present and perhaps taken for fanaticism or mere youthful exuberance. As soon as the Pope understood my thought, he told me, "The young have need to see their ideal personified. If they do not shout, the stones will shout for them!"

This was at the height of the youth protests and the Pope perhaps recognized in the Gen one of the answers of the Holy Spirit to the destruction of all authority and structure which the youth seemed to want.

The fact is that from then on, every time he announced the presence of the Gen at the audiences he sought to prevent criticism by saying, "Now let us be prepared for a great explosion of applause" or "my dearest children, this is not noise or chaos, but a very clear, very welcome language to our ears — it is the expression of your faith" — and everything went fine.

The topics at the other audiences dealt with my encounters with Patriarch Athenagoras or with other matters of a certain relevance regarding the Church. He never failed to inquire about the situation of the Movement, to offer suggestions and encouragement, or to indicate particular activities that ought to be carried out in the service of the Church.

You just mentioned Patriarch Athenagoras. Could you tell us more about him?

Athenagoras, as is widely known, loved the Movement very much. He followed it, took great interest in it, and and declared himself to be a member of it. I often went to see him and inform him of its development. A profound relationship of supernatural confidence grew out of this. The Patriarch would express to me his thoughts, his projects, and his incredible, mystifying even to himself, love for the Pope. He always asked me to convey to the Holy Father his recommendations of many precautions he should take concerning his health, going into many details that were really moving.

I regularly reported on these visits to the Pope. He often answered me with autographed letters which showed how deeply this great Patriarch who was so closely united to him was in the Pope's heart. I remember one letter in which he wrote, "We wish to say how much comfort, how much edification, how much hope your news following the conversation with the venerable Patriarch Athenagoras has brought to our spirit...".

Chiara Lubich met Paul VI before he was a Pope, as far back as 1952. He sustained and encouraged the developing of the Focolare Movement, recognizing in it the presence of a new charism in the Church.

Did you receive other letters from Paul VI?

To me my study in Rocca di Papa is a sacred place for this very reason. On its walls hang eight framed autographed letters from the Pope. They are the greatest treasure I possess. They are still another testimony of his particular love for each single person.

Did the members of your Movement attend public audiences as well?

Certainly. The members of the movement come from five continents to participate in meetings that are held continuously at the Mariapolis Center in Rocca di Papa near Rome. It is more than obvious that their program often includes an audience with the Pope. The word of the Pope is unique. And of course there are many who have never seen him in person. These audiences have always brought immense spiritual fruit. There the members of the Movement could verify that the Pope is Christ on earth. Christ who loves everyone and who, in loving, consumes himself like a burning candle. There they found that heart that loves more than the others. "Peter, do you love me more than these?"

". . . Most of all the pontifical pastoral plan of Paul VI, our immediate Predecessor, has left a strong impression on our heart and in our memory. His sudden death was crushing to the entire world. In the manner of his prophetic style, which marked his unforgettable pontificate, he placed in clear light the extraordinary stature of a great yet humble man. He cast an extraordinary light upon the Church, even in the midst of controversy and hostility these past fifteen years. Undertaking immense labors, he worked indefatigably and without rest. He extended himself to carry into effect the Second Vatican Council and to seek world peace, the *tranquility of order*..."

Pope John Paul I

From talk, *Programme of Pope John Paul I*, taken from the Roman Observer.

This, I think, was the great attraction Paul VI held for the crowds who came to him every Wednesday: the attraction of someone who possessed that which no one else had — a unique heart, capable of loving the whole of humanity and every one individually.

We experienced it.

On nearly a hundred different occasions the Pope addressed one of our groups. I remember a few of those numerous expressions which set our souls on fire.

"We know that the principles inspiring your movement are two: unity and fire (focolari!). We wish that you may always be worthy to serve, to represent, to promote these ideals..." (to the focolarini).

"You represent a living, deep, and elevating reality, that of people present in every country, from every walk of life and all environments, dedicating themselves to Christ and to mankind and making their talents bear full interest" (to the volunteers).

"This is something new, it has never happened before that sisters of different religious families would come together. Now it has happened. Has the fraternity not grown as a result? Has something been taken away from the originality of your institutes? No! The fraternal sharing — which is the Focolare — increases the mutual and collective charity" (to the women religious).

"Our wish to you is that you may draw from the Focolare of charity and unity, on which the movement is based, a great impulse to better understand and better exercise your election to the priesthood" (to the priests).

"The Gen feel, like all young people of today, this sense of malaise and rebellion which is called protest and which can easily lead to negative attitudes. But these young people want to bring new life instead! They ask, 'Where shall we find the new way?' And they answer, in Christ we shall find the new spirit that upsets, if necessary, the crippled and maimed one of our time, in order to create a new one; a kind of springtime and rebirth" (to the Gen).

But the biggest audience was the one of March 2, 1975 during the Holy Year. Twenty thousand of our young people filled St. Peter's either in silence or singing. The Pope celebrated mass and addressed a splendid talk to them. At the offertory I brought him gift in the name of all. It was a bronze etching showing a boat navigating a sea of crosses. It signified the Church of today. After having talked to me and blessed me with fatherly love, he looked at the gift several times and I had the impression that he did not understand its meaning. Perhaps, and this is what I hope, the atmosphere created by the Gen with Jesus in their midst made the Pope forget his great crosses in that moment. This hope of mine seemed to be confirmed by the words he spoke when he stood at the window of his apartment:

"This morning we had around us at the altar, with the other pilgrims twenty thousand faithful, most of them young, who call themselves Gen. It was the new generation coming from all over the world. A moving, beautiful scene. We thank God and take heart again. A new world is being born — the Christian world of faith and charity."

And everytime he welcomed one of our groups he made a point of mentioning and repeating the name "Focolare Movement" very clearly as though to impress in the minds of all the idea and the reality of the fact that the Church had a new offspring. He seemed to echo the words of the liturgy "a child was born unto us, a son was given to us" (Isaiah 9/6).

How can we help but see in Paul VI, the Pope of our Movement, our Pope? ●

WORD OF LIFE

"All you ask the Father in my name

he will give you."

(John 15:16)

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The greatest absurdity in this world is that, on one hand, there are disoriented men who search endlessly and who, while undergoing the inevitable trials of life, are anxious for help and feel like orphans; on the other hand, God who is the Father of all, desires nothing more than to show his omnipotence by granting the wishes of his children and satisfying their needs.

It is like an emptiness which calls for a fullness, like a fullness calling for an emptiness. Yet the two do not meet.

The freedom with which man is endowed can also hurt him in this way.

But God is always Love for those who recognize him.

Listen to what Jesus says, "All you ask the Father in my name he will give you."(John 15-16).

Think about these words so rich in promises; they are like others which we find in the Gospel and through which Jesus teaches us, with different explanations, how to obtain what we need.

Let's consider this word of life. There is no need to say it; even a blind man could see that they are words of God.

What great man, what king, what father or mother, what person who loves you with all his heart could promise to give you "all" that you ask?

Only God can speak in this way. His power is unlimited and he can bestow all graces whether they be spiritual or material, possible or impossible.

But pay close attention; Jesus is telling you how to present your request to the Father, "In my name," he says.

Even if you have only a little faith, these words should give you wings. Jesus, who lived here among us, knows our numerous needs, and he takes pity on us. Whenever you pray, he too wants to be involved; it is as if he were telling you, "Go to the Father in my name and ask him this and that and the other thing." He knows that the Father cannot say 'No' to him, because he is his son, and he is God.

You do not go to the Father on your own behalf, but in the name of Christ. You become only the messenger.

It is Jesus who takes care of the matter with his Father.

There are many Christians who pray in this way, and they could tell you about the innumerable graces they have received. They could witness that, in his fatherly love, God watches over them every day.

"All you ask the Father in my name he will give you" (John 15-16).

You may say to me, "I have asked time and again in the name of Christ, but to no avail."

It is possible. I mentioned before that there are other passages of the Gospel in which Jesus invites us to ask for what we need. In them he gives further explanations which you have probably overlooked.

He says, for instance, that one obtains what he requests if he "remains" in him, and that means to remain in his will.

God has a marvellous plan for each one of us, and also for you. It is composed of thousands and thousands of events, occurrences, meetings, people and things. It is a plan derived from the highest and most sublime love. The most intelligent thing one can do upon meeting God the Father is to write the story of his life, moment by moment, following not his own will, but the will of God.

Suffering is not excluded from this plan, exactly because it is a plan of love, and suffering is the essential element which gives meaning to the life of a Christian.

Suffering brings about spiritual purification and patience, and nurtures all the virtues. Through your suffering you help Christ to redeem the world.

It is possible that you may ask for something which doesn't coincide with God's plan for you, something which he doesn't consider useful to your life here on earth or in heaven; in fact, it could even be something harmful.

How could he, your Father, grant your prayer in this case? He would betray you, and that he will never do.

Then it might be useful for you to make an agreement with him before praying, and to say, "Father, I would like to ask you this in the name of Jesus if you think it is okay."

If the grace for which you ask coincide with God's plan for you, then these words will come true, **"All you ask the Father in my name he will give you"** (John 15-16).

It could also be that you ask for graces without any intention of conforming your life to what God demands.

Do you think that in this case it would be fair for God to grant what you request? He doesn't want to give you only a gift; he wants to give you complete happiness, and you can possess it only if you live the commandments of God, and his words. It is not enough to think about them, not even to meditate on them; they must be lived.

If you do this, you will obtain everything.

To summarize, would you like to obtain graces?

Ask for anything you want in the name of Christ, intending, above all, to do his will and obey his laws.

God is very happy to give us graces. Unfortunately, we don't give him the chance oftentimes.

Chiara Lubich

WORD OF LIFE FOR DECEMBER

"Keep watch,
because you do not know
on what day
your Lord will come."

(Mt. 24:42)

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